

1419-today: Czech anarchism

A brief but detailed history of anarchist ideas and the anarchist movement in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bohemia.

The history of the Czech anarchism is a history of the development of libertarian radicals, some of whom left their ideas and moved into high power posts, or became propagandists of the Bolshevik totalitarian ideology. Even after the revival of the anarchist movement we can see how the movement forms stable organisations while at the same time also cutting off into activist ghettos. The history of Czech anarchism isn't black and white – and that way perhaps it's more interesting and instructive.

Tradition before the rise of the movement

Many revolts can be found throughout the Czech Middle Ages. The most considerable was the Hussite movement that in 1419-1434 lead to a war between Catholics and those wanting church and social reforms. Those most important in this movement were radicals associated in the newly found town Tabor (that became for a short time the first commune in the European history) and the radicals in the adams movement (blamed for nudism and sexual promiscuity). Also very important were the peasant revolts with social motifs in 17th and 18th century that mostly didn't end well.

From the end of the 18th century national liberation ideas grew among Czech people living in the Habsburg monarchy that included Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, part of Poland, Italy etc. The conditions under the Habsburg monarchy gave rise to a radically democratic nationalism, supported mostly by young people. This group played a lead role in the short 1848 Prague revolt. Bakunin, that time a radical democrat, also cooperated with this group. However, the anarchist movement itself would arise a few decades later.

The roots of Czech anarchism

The anarchist movement in the 19th century had several practical and intellectual sources. First was labour radicalism, affected above all by Die Freiheit magazine, edited by proponent of "propaganda by deed" terrorism Johan Most. His ideas found strong responses in Bohemia, and his magazine was (generally successfully) imitated.

Another source was the Czech socialist movement abroad, especially in the USA, where the most active organisers and activists were being expelled by the continuous repression. The most radical ones turned to anarchism, and were extending it back into their countries. Magazines like Budoucnost (The Future) in Chicago or Volnost (Free lists) in New York (from 1890 to at least 1917) had a considerable influence over the anarchist movement, partly for its contact with the international anarchist movement and partly because they were not being censored.

Also a movement of socially radical youth around the magazine Omladina (The Youth) had considerable importance. In February 1894, 68 of those were given short-term prison sentences. This radicalised many of them and reassured them in their anarchist convictions.

Anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism

The north-bohemian miners and the labourers in the textile industry created the social base of anarchism. Understandably, individualism and secret unions did not satisfy them.

In 1896, there was a 12 days miners' strike. Eight thousand miners got involved and several attacks on mine officials, strike-breakers and the mine equipment occurred. But this was used as a pretext for the army to suppress the strike, and as a consequence many were punished by firing or expulsion from the country. A more successful mining strike was, in January 1900, held in Austria.

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small anarchist loan office was founded and several cooperative project are created, but altogether they weren't very successful.

Another inspiration was revolutionary syndicalism. In 1903, after several years of discussion, the North-bohemian mining federation (Severoceska hornicka federace, SHF) arose with about eight hundred members. A year later two other important organisations started. The Czech anarchist federation (Ceska anarchistka federace, CAF) with several hundred members was intended to be spreading clearly defined anarchist ideas. The Czech federation of all unions

(Ceska federace vsech odborů, CFVO) (about 1200

members) was intended to be a radical labour organisation. According to S. K. Neumann, poet and anarchist organiser, the CAF was to be the "brains" of the movement, while the CFVO its "fist" which showed its vanguardist aspirations. The syndicalist founders of the CFVO could never agree with this.

They weren't just apolitical syndicalists, on the contrary, they had been propagandists of anarchism for a long time.

The years 1905-1906 were very important, because under the influence of the 1905 Russian revolution anarchists became more active. Whereas sometimes they acted as a radical component in reformist actions, they now began to take their own action. The mining strike from the 30th August to 17th September 1906 was important, but again ended unsuccessfully, because, besides other reasons, of a lack of solidarity from the social democrats.

In 1908 the CFVO was officially dissolved (Austro-Hungarian authorities terrified by its influence among railway's staff) and repressed.

After the extinction of CFVO, the CAF became more significant, which after it stopped publishing the magazine Prace (Labour), succeeded in publishing a weekly magazine Zadruha (The Cooperative). On the other hand, the syndicalist movement, never revived its former force and significance, even with new organisations being formed.

The roots of the decline of the Czech anarchism

The Czech anarchist movement had many faults. For instance, the low participation of women. Czech anarchism also had artists, writers, editors of magazines and propagandist, but not one theorist. The movement was also busy with all kinds of infighting, which discouraged many originally interested workers. Organisations such as CAF and CFVO needed leaders of each union and besides that, leaders of the movement as a whole. These were mostly the anarchist magazine's publishers, who were in fact "full time activists". This resulted in creating some kind of elite.

Probably the biggest problem was that the anarchist movement after twenty years of existence didn't achieve any success. On the contrary, the strikes were ending unsuccessfully and even the project of creating a "communist colony"

was unsuccessful. As we can see, the movement wasn't able to organise one successful strike. This led to a feeling of ineffectiveness.

At the beginning of the war Bohuslav Vrbensky (1882-1944), an anarchist and dentist, tried to work out a concept to solve the situation. He decided to concretise anarchist positions and define them not only against any state but, before all, against the Austria-Hungarian state. This had a clear aim, the independent stateless organisation of Bohemia. At the same time they needed an efficient form of organisation, which was supposed to be a "specific political party" not involved in the state legislative body and relatively autonomous yet much better than the present CAF. Michael Kacha (1874-1940), cobbler and editor of the magazines *Prace* and *Zadruha* was against this proposal. In 1914 Vrbensky's proposal was accepted. Though all changes to the program were to be in the long term, the CAF changed to the federation of Czech anarchist communists (FCAK).

The big war

Any other changes in the movement were stopped by the outbreak of World War I. Immediately after,

anarchist organisations and their magazines were prohibited, and confiscation of property and internment of many activists occurred. In their places came those who got involved in the movement recently. Their first goal was to maintain the movement, which they succeeded despite many of them leaving to fight in the war. In 1915 anarchists held several strikes in northern Bohemia and perspectives for new activities are opened. Prague anarchists got involved in the workers' self-activity and the creation of workers' councils.

Under the difficult wartime conditions the anarchists changed from a movement opposed to any state to a radical part of Czech national liberation. In Bohemia the anarchists fought for the independent Czech state. The 22nd January 1918 the anarchists were actively involved in a big strike and parallel demonstration, during which they made their speech with other socialists. They wanted to extend the strike into northern Bohemia, and they discussed it with Alois Rasin (later ultra-right Finance Minister) and Jaroslav Preiss (director of a big bank). This attempt of class collaboration was an absolute failure, because these representatives of the interests of capital supported the strike with their words, not their money.

During these activities the anarchists got closer to the dissidents among social democrats and above all with national socialists (socialist nationalists not nazis), with which they had the pre-war anti-militarist fight. The anarchists started to endeavour to unite all socialist parties and in February 1918 they invited the others to do it. Only the anarchists and the national socialists united in the Czech (later Czechoslovak) socialist party (CSS). The anarchists participated significantly in the creation of their program, which was socialist and considerably autonomous. It left a longer-term space for a social revolution and libertarian socialism but this was just a temporary concession from the national socialist opportunists, only to strengthen their party during the historical crisis. The anarchists participated in the common general strike the 14 October 1918 and in promulgation of the Republic the 28 October 1918 as well.

Ministers, deputies and founders of the Communist Party

In 1919, a meeting of anarchists took place where, despite the disagreement of the members, the leaders persuaded them that it was necessary to be united with the national socialists. This was the end of the classical anarchist movement.

The new Czechoslovak Republic was being supported by the anarchists, because they saw many socialist hopes in it. Vrbensky became the minister of supply (1918-1919), later the minister of public works (1920) and also the minister for health service and physical training (1921-1922). B. Vrbensky, S. K.

Neumann, T. Bartosek and L. Landova-Stychova represented the anarchists in parliament. But their hopes were very soon disappointed. The anarchists helped the republic to gain the workers' sympathies. Step by step they were being deprived of any real influence over matters.

The reactions of anarchists varied. In 1920 the group around S. K. Neumann and his magazine Cerven stood down (he himself had left parliament already, his place taken by anarcho-syndicalist Vaclav Draxl).

This group went through the enthusiasm about the Russian revolution and finally unconditionally accepted Bolshevism. S. K. Neumann after leaving the CSS established a federation of communist groups, which later united with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC).

The extinction and the rebirth of the Czech anarchism...

Former anarchists also acted in another way. Fratisek Sauer, well-known anarchist bohemian is famous as one of the founders of the "black arm", which took empty buildings and gave them to working families.

This was the first kind of squatting in the Bohemia.

Two anarchist assassinations were attempted in the Czechoslovak Republic. In January 1919 16-year-old A. L. Stastny shot at the Prime Minister Karel Kramar, later very unpopular, at that time the man that gave rise to the independent state. The attempt wasn't successful. In 1923, 19-year-old Josef Soupal who executed the, this time successful, attempt. The target of the second was the unpopular Minister of finances Alois Rasin, responsible for the exploiting currency policy. Both attempts discredited anarchism,

increasing repression and feelings of support to the victim. After the second attempt the first Czech fascist organisation "Cervenobili" (Red and Whites) was formed during the hysterical demonstrations of the Right.

In this context, any attempt to renew the anarchist tradition was destined to fail. This wasn't helped by the fact that in 1923, a group that tried to do it followed anarchism with religious enthusiasm (e.g. one important member of this group named his daughter Bakunina!) and elitism - the "enlighted minority group of anarchists". This group didn't last even a year. After this, there isn't any information about an anarchist movement, only absolutely fragmentary actions concerning a few individuals, who perhaps sympathised with anarchism.

So the flag of the libertarian Left was overtaken by the Trotskyists. But we must specify, that the Stalinists denoted as "Trotskyist" almost anybody who criticised their system from a revolutionary Marxist position. Many didn't revolt against this label because at the time a "Trotskyist" was the public enemy number one, and so this word had the excitable sense of political taboo.

Czechoslovak surrealists took the libertarian left position and it lead to their ostracism from the Stalinist's side and later to their going underground. An interesting representative of the Czech underground culture is a poet, prose-writer and philosopher Egon Bondy, influenced by Trotskyism, Maoism and sympathies with anarchism. The movement of the revolutionary youth, a Trotskyist group, against which there was a trial in 1971, was influenced by anarchism too. Besides Trotsky, the Czech Trotskyist movement published many

other books e.g. the French text *Socialisme ou barbarie*.

After the fall of Bolshevism in 1989 the Trotskyists created a free platform of the autonomous and liberal activities called *Leva alternativa* ("The left alternative"), in which the anarchists also participated.

However, alternative culture had a much more important influence on the rise of anarchism. The punk subculture gave rise to an environment sympathetic to anarchist ideas. A very important magazine was *Voknoviny* (window-newspaper), after 1989 renamed *Kontra*. This magazine became explicitly anarchist in 1991 with the title *A-kontra*. It was the first nationwide magazine in the Czechoslovak anarchist movement. Already at that time quite strong anarcho-punk groups coexisted, especially gathered around local political music zines of different levels.

The Czechoslovak anarchist association (*Ceskoslovenske anarchistke sdruzeni*), was founded in October 1989 in Prague, a month before the change of regime. Involved in the *Leva alternativa* they tried to coordinate anarchist activities. They were organising anti-militarist demonstrations and very soon street fights with the fascist skinheads started, culminating in a huge battle at *Letenska* in Prague in 1992, which ended with a victory for the anarchists. Anarchists also protested against the abandonment of the original ideals of the "velvet revolution", the creation of a new elite and restoration of the market capitalism.

. .and its development

In 1991 the Anarchist Federation is formed around the magazine *Autonomie*, which attempted to include all parts of the anarchist movement. Besides this, another organisation started, the *Anarchosyndikalisticka iniciativa* (Anarcho-syndicalist initiative), which had a little influence. Theories from abroad and inspiration from foreign anarchists had the most significant influence on the movement's development.

The first split in the anarchist movement occurred in 1992. While the majority wanted to boycott the elections, some of the *A-kontra* editorial staff defended the opinion that it would be better to vote for the Communist Party. They chose this as a "lesser evil", because they themselves were not able to hold back the aggressive Right and capitalism.

An important event in the Czech anarchist history was the September 2000 IMF

and World Bank meeting in Prague. Anarchists together with Trotskyists, radical environmentalists other organisations formed a platform Iniciativa proti ekonomické globalizaci (INPEG) and were intensively involved in the protests.

But the protests, which culminated in a demonstration of 12,000 people and running battles with the police, had a lot of problems. The coalition agreed in what it opposed but didn't give an alternative.

Because of the one day of protests the work with common people in the Czech republic was forgotten. For more, the campaign in the medias after the protests strengthened the repressive climate in the Czech Republic.

After the protests the weakened movement was going on in its activities, the single organisation development, but also the atmosphere of the "activist ghettos" is strengthened throughout the movement.

Meanwhile, some attempts of self reflection occur.

Translated by Petra Horská, edited by libcom

source: A-kontra